

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Anatomy of a Fact Check: Objective Practice and the Contested Epistemology of Fact Checking

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This article presents a detailed ethnographic account of objective practice among professional fact checkers, reporters who specialize in assessing the truth of political claims. Some critics argue that political debate is inherently value-laden and defies objective fact checking; I offer an alternative view highlighting the practical epistemology revealed in the news-work routines and discourse of working fact checkers. Drawing links between core concepts in the sociology of science and journalism studies, this analysis highlights how in moments of institutional unsettlement, verification relies on factual coherence, rather than straightforward correspondence. To develop this argument, I anatomize a fact check produced as a participant observer with a major national fact-checking organization.

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Can journalists objectively evaluate the truth of political claims? How do they resolve in practice factual debates grounded in ideological difference? In what has been called a “global boom” (Kessler, 2014) in fact checking, reporters across the United States and around the world are embracing a controversial role: to hold public figures accountable for false statements. The fact-checking movement in journalism offers an explicit critique of so-called “he said, she said” accounts that refuse to take sides in factual disputes (e.g., Dobbs, 2012). Although some reporters have questioned whether adjudicating political debates is appropriate for objective journalists (e.g., Brisbane, 2012), professional elites have embraced the trend widely; as the former public editor of *The New York Times* argued, “What is the role of the media if not to press for some semblance of reality amid the smoke and mirrors?” (Sullivan, 2012, para. 20).

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In the United States, many local and almost all national news outlets have featured political fact checking for the 2012 and 2016 elections. This includes major networks—NPR, CBS, ABC, NBC, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC—as well as newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* (Graves, 2016). The sense that political discourse has only grown wilder in 2016 may raise doubts about the effectiveness of fact checking (e.g., Kinsley, 2016), but also helps to cement the norm that journalists must do their best to debunk false claims. In particular, the surprising success of Donald Trump—with an “astonishingly poor” record among professional fact checkers (Drobnic Holan, 2015, p. SR4)—has fueled widespread calls for more aggressive fact checking (e.g., Gourarie, 2016). As the host of CNN’s *Reliable Sources* declared, “Trump represents a unique challenge for the press ... We have to address it head-on as journalists” (CNN, 2016).

At the same time, this emerging genre has its critics. Fact checkers are often accused of being partisan, usually in favor of Democrats (Stencel, 2015). Other critics argue that they practice a form of “false equivalence,” portraying both parties as equally deceptive in order to avoid charges of bias (e.g., Krugman, 2011). The most serious and sustained critique of this brand of journalism is that it discounts the value-laden nature of political discourse by trying to offer decisive factual conclusions about subjective questions of opinion or ideology. Scholars and media critics alike have argued that political fact checking is hopelessly flawed because “the subject matter of politics is often complex, ambiguous, and open to a variety of conflicting interpretations” (Uscinski & Butler, 2013, p. 163).

This common epistemological critique, I argue, draws an implicit line between journalism and other fact-centered disciplines—especially the sciences—in a way that obscures the real work of building facts. This article has two goals. One is to offer a close, ethnographic account of objective practice among professional fact checkers in the United States. The systematic overview I present here draws on fieldwork with U.S. fact checkers conducted between 2010 and 2014, including more than 200 hours of direct observation of newsroom procedures, training sessions for new staff and interns, and professional forums where fact checkers gather to discuss their methods; as a scaffold for the discussion here, I dissect a fact check that was produced during my research as a participant observer with a prominent fact-checking group.¹ The analysis in this article adds an important case to research on reporting practices in the contemporary news ecosystem (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2010; Konieczna & Robinson, 2014; Ryfe, 2012; Usher, 2014). The three major national fact-checking organizations are products of that ecosystem but also have deep ties to professional journalism, and seek to revitalize the “truth-seeking” tradition in the field (Graves & Konieczna, 2015; e.g., Dobbs, 2012).

The second goal is to outline a more useful approach to the much-debated epistemology of fact checking by drawing comparisons with studies of scientific work. A growing literature has used science and technology studies (STS) to examine new technologies and practices in the newsroom, new journalistic actors and forms, and professional struggles across a reconfigured media industry (e.g., Anderson, 2013;

Boczkowski, 2004, 2010; Braun, 2015; Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Hemmingway, 2008). Research on news production and distribution routines always speaks to objective practice at least indirectly. But debates over fact checking turn directly on epistemological questions at the center of both classic newsroom studies (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978) and the sociology of science: How are objective facts made? Or put differently, what makes facts objective? I use the case study developed here to highlight a basic parallel among the work of fact checkers, investigative journalists, and scientists: Each deals with controversies in which not just facts but rules for determining them are in question, and thus affords a view of the way material, social, and discursive contexts structure factual inquiry.

The epistemological critique of fact checking

Before examining how fact checkers go about their work it is worth considering the epistemological critique of the fact checkers more closely, because it evokes the central tension between what historian of science Steven Shapin (1994) calls “restrictive” and “liberal” notions of truth. The critique rests on the powerful, commonsense idea that hard facts—paradigmatically, scientific facts—exist outside of systems of value and are not subject to interpretation. This aligns with “correspondence” (e.g., as opposed to pragmatist or coherentist) theories of truth: a fact is something that is indisputably the case, a true statement one that corresponds to the facts of reality (see David, 2016). Of course, even well-established facts are open to challenge; we use the word “fact” to *assert* indisputability. A restrictive, black-and-white sense of truth is necessary for the daily work of sorting out what we should believe from what we should not, but it is also incomplete, Shapin (1994) argues, obscuring the sense in which truth is a “social institution,” a matter of “collective judgment,” and “collective actions” (p. 6). If we want to understand *how* things come to be taken as true—in different eras or cultures or disciplines, for instance—we must examine the meaning-making contexts that help to define our shared reality.

The charge that fact checkers go astray in applying the language of fact to questions of political opinion has been aired frequently (see Graves, 2016). It follows from the idea that value-laden claims cannot be tested for their correspondence to reality. Thus, *The Wall Street Journal* has objected to fact checking as “part of a larger journalistic trend that seeks to recast all political debates as matters of lies, misinformation and ‘facts,’ rather than differences of world view or principles” (PolitiFiction, 2010, p. A16). Political fact checking is a “doomed enterprise,” echoed a writer for the progressive *Mother Jones*, because political debates depend on context and values—and “once you get into context and interpretation, you can’t really say you’re fact-checking anymore” (Drum, 2013, para. 5).

Some political scientists make a parallel argument. Uscinski and Butler (2013) accuse fact checkers of a “naïve political epistemology” based on the “tacit presupposition that there cannot be genuine political debate about facts, because facts are unambiguous and not subject to interpretation” (p. 162), when in actuality “the

appropriate context of a fact is almost always legitimately contestable, and it usually is in fact contested, in politics” (pp. 167–168). They catalog a series of “dubious” fact-checking practices and fault these journalists for the lack of a rigorous, scientific methodology. Similarly, Marietta, Barker, and Bowser (2015) undertake a “comparative epistemology” (p. 577) of three major U.S. fact checkers, pointing to inconsistency in their rulings as a sign of an unreliable methodology that differs sharply from “social science approaches to knowledge” (p. 585). (In contrast, Amazeen [2015] finds high agreement in fact checkers’ verdicts.) These methodological failings are taken as basic “pathologies” in fact checking that “render the entire enterprise suspect” (Uscinski, 2015, p. 3).

This epistemological critique misses the mark in two important ways. First, it fails to consider seriously the nuances of the objectivity norm as practiced and understood by professional journalists. In newswork routines, internal discourse, and public statements, fact checkers demonstrate constantly that they appreciate the ambiguous character of facts in politics. They aim to offer decisive factual rulings but also explain that “reasonable people can reach different conclusions about a claim” (Adair & Drobnic Holan, 2013, “Corrections and Review,” para. 7). Leading fact checkers note that “depending on your opinion, you look at the facts in a different way” (G. Kessler, personal communication, 18 April 2012) and that “the truth in politics is often not black and white, but shades of gray” (Adair, 2010, para. 7; see also Jackson, 2012). They openly concede that their work reflects journalistic judgment. As PolitiFact’s editor explained in a *New York Times* op-ed about the 2016 presidential race,

We don’t check absolutely everything a candidate says, but focus on what catches our eye as significant, newsworthy or potentially influential. Our ratings are also not intended to be statistically representative but to show trends over time. ... I sometimes feel the need to remind people [the Truth-O-Meter] is *not* an actual scientific instrument. (Drobnic Holan, 2015, p. SR4)

To critics, such caveats only offer further proof of fact checking’s inherent subjectivity (e.g., Uscinski, 2015). But the sort of epistemological modesty demonstrated by fact checkers is a basic feature of professional journalism. As a well-known text on journalism ethics states, “We understand truth as a goal—at best elusive—and still embrace it” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 45). Schudson (1978) emphasizes that under the objectivity norm that began to take hold a century ago, “facts ... are not aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it” (p. 6). The norm reflected not a naïve but an increasingly cautious journalistic epistemology; objectivity was an alternative to “naïve empiricism,” meaning the belief that the news simply reflected reality (see also Schudson, 2001). Maras (2013) notes that objectivity in journalism has no single definition but finds expression in a cluster of overlapping ideals—neutrality, accuracy, fairness, and so forth. The field constantly questions and revises its methods in response to perceived flaws in objective practice (Zelizer, 1993). The historical rise of more critical, analytical reporting (Barnhurst, 2014; Fink & Schudson, 2014) reflects an ongoing struggle to make journalism sensitive to the

limits of mechanical objectivity and to the relationship between truth and power (Hallin, 1992; Nerone, 2013). As Nerone (2013) argues, “It has been a long time since intelligent journalists ... believed in the simple facticity of their craft” (p. 26).

This points to the more basic flaw in the epistemological critique: In trying to enforce an exacting standard of truth, it flirts with the view that in politics all claims have equal merit. Uscinski and Butler (2013) write that fact checking “ignores the most important objective reality of politics: namely, that all the facts discussed in politics are ambiguous enough to make for legitimate doubt” (p. 172). But is this a reasonable response to the problem of truth in political discourse? The idea that the facts in a newspaper depend on a mix of evidence and interpretation, that they exist in value-laden institutional-political contexts, is basic to the sociology of news (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). More broadly, critical cultural scholars have argued that entire modes of factual discourse—or “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980)—reflect, for instance, shifting media system arrangements (Baym, 2010) or the nature of political authority (Bratich, 2008). However, such critiques do not apply narrowly to journalism and politics. On the contrary, they draw on broad currents in philosophy, social theory, and the history of science; they call for nuance in evaluating facts, not for abandoning the effort (see Maras, 2013, pp. 74–77).

It is worth noting that even many quantitative studies of political knowledge, whose design depends on a workable standard of objective truth, also recognize that “in politics, facts do not speak for themselves” (Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007, p. 957) and that “the boundaries that distinguish facts, debatable claims, and outright lies are contested” (Kuklinski, Quirk, Schwieder, & Rich, 1998, p. 149). But rather than surrendering to ambiguity these studies respond with greater conceptual and methodological nuance. Thus Gaines et al. (2007) separate factual beliefs from interpretations of those beliefs. Kuklinski et al. (1998) argue for taking into account citizens’ values in addition to factual evidence and expert judgment. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) reject a black-and-white view of falsehood in favor of the “less stringent standard” of misperception, defined as beliefs that don’t match “the best available evidence and expert opinion” (p. 305). As we shall see, this is a reasonable description of the standard of truth applied by fact checkers themselves.

By holding that politics inherently defy fact checking, the epistemological critique reproduces a naïve divide between facts in the political world and other presumably unproblematic facts. (In this sense it might be read as a form of “demarcation,” identifying politics as an unscientific domain of values; see Gieryn, 1983.) It treats as “differences of opinion” (Uscinski & Butler, 2013, p. 168) what are better understood as matters of factual *argument*; unlike an opinion about the best flavor of ice cream, factual arguments can be more or less reasonable, supported by evidence, in line with expert consensus, and so on. This demands interpretation, it is true, but every factual claim raises questions of context and interpretation. A broad literature in the history of science holds that scientific facts only exist in the context of a larger interpretive scheme (e.g., Fleck, 1981; Kuhn, 2012). Scientific facts are deeply collective, argues Latour (2005), made durable by networks of ideas and people and equipment. Any

useful view of the epistemology of fact checking should understand it as a practical truth-seeking endeavor not fundamentally different from other kinds of factual inquiry. This demands attention to what Daston and Galison (2007) call “objectivity in shirtsleeves”: the everyday routines and tacit understandings that guide scientific investigation. The rest of this article examines the day-to-day work of professional fact checkers, and then develops several basic parallels to core concepts in the sociology of science; in both domains, verification often depends on factual *coherence* rather than straightforward correspondence.

Method and case

The overview of fact-checking methodology below draws on fieldwork and interviews with the three major U.S.-based fact-checking outlets, but focuses on Washington, DC-based PolitiFact.² The site was founded in 2007 as an independent project of the *Tampa Bay Times* and employs a full-time staff of about 10 journalists, who produce 20 to 30 fact checks each week for PolitiFact and its sister site Punditfact, launched in 2013. Dozens more reporters contribute fact checks from a network of state media partners, which license PolitiFact’s brand and methodology, publishing in their own print and broadcast outlets and on dedicated pages at politifact.com. PolitiFact rates statements on the trademarked Truth-O-Meter, a 6-point scale that runs from “True” to “Pants on Fire.” Every verdict is compiled in a master database, which aggregates statistics by speaker, topic, and so forth. The group relies on a step-by-step process for evaluating political claims, detailed in an in-house guide called the Truth-O-Meter “owners manual.” The final ruling is determined in a vote by a three-person panel of editors according to a set of five Truth-O-Meter “principles,” the most important of which are “Words matter” and “Context matters” (Adair & Drobnic Holan, 2013).

Though professional fact checkers rely on broadly similar research methods, PolitiFact’s explicit methodology, codified to promote consistency across its franchise network, offers an ideal case study. The discussion below is organized around a fact check that I researched and wrote as a participant observer at the group’s headquarters, under close supervision and following standard procedures (see Graves, 2016). The methods described reflect my direct observation of editorial work and discussion for more than 30 separate Truth-O-Meter items. To focus through the lens of a single case entails trade-offs, of course. Fact checkers investigate claims made in different contexts, and their reasoning varies depending on the nature of the claim. However, a large-scale content analysis (for instance, categorizing sources or evidence across many articles) would sacrifice a nuanced view of the epistemology of fact checking. It is precisely because logical reasoning and discourse happen in specific contexts (Suchman, 1987) that a case-driven approach provides valuable insight. Again, though framed auto-ethnographically, this analysis reflects extensive fieldwork with multiple fact-checking organizations and highlights common research procedures.

Five elements of fact checking

To organize this discussion, I divide fact-checking routines into five distinct areas of practice that emerged in fieldwork: choosing claims to check, contacting the speaker, tracing false claims, dealing with experts, and showing your work. I then briefly describe the diffusion of the fact check I wrote and the responses it provoked, and conclude with a discussion of objective practice in fact checking.

Choosing claims to check

Finding statements to investigate is a vital and time-consuming function at professional fact-checking organizations. What one editor described as the “art of finding a checkable fact” involves considerations of newsworthiness, meaning political significance as well as utility or interest for the imagined audience; of fairness or balance, whereby nonpartisan fact checkers scrutinize figures from “both sides” of the American political spectrum; and of “checkability.” In training sessions that I observed at PolitiFact and FactCheck.org, editors stressed the cardinal rule that there is no way to check a statement of opinion, but also said this can be a difficult line to draw. Both organizations have routinized the process of finding claims to check, performed daily by staff as well as interns.

At PolitiFact, this is known internally as “stocking the buffet” — adding new statements to an online spreadsheet from which editors assign Truth-O-Meter articles. During my fieldwork, new staff relied on a four-page list of “buffet sources” that spanned subscription-only databases, professional news organizations, and political and campaign sites. In practice, the job consists mainly of reading through news reports and transcripts of political events or radio and TV programs. PolitiFact checks statements by pundits as well as politicians, and during my fieldwork an editor suggested I search for claims in the political programming on MSNBC and Fox News. This coincided with the 2011 uprisings in Egypt’s Tahrir Square, and I searched for statements relating to that important story. Finding claims that were both interesting and checkable proved surprisingly difficult, but over an afternoon I identified several candidates from both networks. The most dramatic came from Fox News host Glenn Beck, who on his February 4 broadcast made a startling claim about Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood:

We told you this week how if Mubarak does step down, however, the Muslim Brotherhood would be the most likely group to seize power. They’ve openly stated they want to declare war on Israel and they would end the peace agreement with Israel and they would work towards instituting something we told you about, a caliphate. (Beck, 2011b)

Every Truth-O-Meter item rules on a discrete factual claim, usually a verbatim quote, known internally as the “ruling statement.” With an editor’s approval I began researching Beck’s claim that the Muslim Brotherhood had “openly stated they want to declare war on Israel” (Beck, 2011b; Graves, 2011). PolitiFact instructs reporters to approach each statement with an open mind regardless of the speaker’s record or

reputation, and I tried to do that in this case. I knew little about the Muslim Brotherhood and it seemed possible Beck's claim would prove out.

Contacting the speaker

PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker all make a point of contacting the author of a suspect claim. This was explained to trainees as a matter both of fairness and of investigative technique. People and organizations subject to fact checking must be given the chance to account for their words (though fact checks run even when the subject cannot be reached). But contacting the author of a claim early in the research also saves time by providing what PolitiFact's training manual called a "road map to the facts" (field notes, February 9, 2011). Politicians and campaigns expect scrutiny from fact checkers and often have documentation, or "backup," at the ready. Even inadequate documentation may offer useful evidence, for instance, by showing that data were cited selectively or words taken out of context.

Following protocol, I began by trying to reach the press contact listed on the website for Glenn Beck's program; as I was warned, his staff did not respond. (Certain public figures have a reputation among fact checkers for being unreachable. Those who respond promptly, even after rulings go against them, are praised for their "professionalism.") Next, I set about trying to trace the origin of Beck's claim about the Muslim Brotherhood. On a previous broadcast Beck had quoted a "top official" in the Muslim Brotherhood as declaring that, "The people should be prepared for war against Israel" (Beck, 2011a). I searched Google for that exact phrase.

Tracing false claims

As might be expected, fact checkers turn constantly to Google and to proprietary news databases such as LexisNexis to track down questionable claims, which often appeared first in a news report. "Often they'll rely on some news report that itself is flimsy, or they'll take a report from a blog that supports their point of view," new PolitiFact reporters were told in a training session (field notes, 16 June 2011). Watching fact checkers work showed consistently that the key to their analysis lay in discovering a claim's origin and reconstructing its spread. In practice, how a claim moves through the media-political landscape provides important contextual cues in assessing its truth value, as it did in this case.

Finding the original source of the phrase Beck quoted took several hours. Of thousands of results returned by Google, the earliest appeared to be a 1 February article on the website of the English-language *Jerusalem Post*. (I would later discover that Beck published a source list for his broadcasts online, confirming that this was his source.) The piece began this way:

A leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt told the Arabic-language Iranian news network Al-Alam on Monday that he would like to see the Egyptian people prepare for war against Israel, according to the Hebrew-language business newspaper Calcalist. (Lappin, 2011, para. 1)

The *Jerusalem Post* attributed the words to “Muhammad Ghannem.” But neither that article nor other English-language coverage linked to the original news report. By translating the name “Ghannem” into Arabic and pasting that into Al-Alam’s search box I eventually found a 31 January article that, translated into English by Google, reported on an interview with Ghannem on the subject of U.S. support for the Egyptian military. The article included a sentence calling for civil disobedience to demonstrate “the willingness of people to war against Israel, until the world realizes that the Egyptian people are ready for everything ... to get rid of this system.”³ That rhetoric was picked up by the *Calcalist* and then *The Jerusalem Post*, whose headline gave the provocative phrase a new author: “Muslim Brotherhood: ‘Prepare Egyptians for War with Israel’” (Lappin, 2011).

It is worth reviewing the different kinds of translation in play here. First, Arabic words were translated into Hebrew and into English; people might disagree about what Ghannem’s words meant, depending on context, rhetorical practice, and so forth. (Thus, experts I would interview pointed to earlier instances of “meaningless rhetoric” from the Muslim Brotherhood.) Second, a person’s words were attributed to an organization. The fact check would hinge on the question of whether Ghannem could speak for the Brotherhood. And finally, a phrase uttered in a discussion of U.S. ties to Egypt’s military was moved into a new documentary context, as a frightening headline. (One expert pointed out that the reference to “preparing the people for war” was part of Ghannem’s call for “civil disobedience,” indicating that the point was to question the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime in Egypt.)

The *Jerusalem Post* article gave Ghannem’s words—attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood—an online anchor in the English-speaking world. The phrase spread quickly across U.S. blogs, discussion groups, news sites, and cable news programming. Many reports identified Ghannem as a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, with no explanation of that status (e.g., “Egypt’s Blood on Obama’s Hands?,” 2011). As Beck declared on the air,

How do they feel about Israel? Well, a top official in the Muslim Brotherhood has just said that—he said this while expressing support for the Egyptian protesters. And this is critical that you remember this. “The people should be prepared for war against Israel.” ...

You don’t believe me? I don’t really care. Do your own homework. Don’t trust me on anything. Do your own homework. Go to GlennBeck.com and look all of it up. If you don’t believe our research, go find it yourself. (Beck, 2011a)

Tracing the spread of the claim about the Muslim Brotherhood—documenting how media and political actors amplified it—was useful in evaluating its accuracy. The phrase’s media footprint shaped my judgment. If Ghannem’s words amounted to a serious threat, why had not they been covered by elite U.S. news outlets? In fact, major news organizations were carrying reassurances about the peace treaty; the principal spokesperson for the Brotherhood told NPR directly that there was “no threat of war,” as my fact check would note (Graves, 2011, para. 16). Of course, these official

reassurances could not be taken at face value. The force of PolitiFact's verdict came from an expert consensus that Beck's claim about the Muslim Brotherhood made no sense.

Working with experts

The need to consult experts presents a constant problem for fact checkers. PolitiFact and FactCheck.org both instruct their reporters to rely on official data from government agencies such as the Census Bureau, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Government Accountability Office. During my fieldwork, trainees at both organizations received written lists of trusted official sources. "We want to make sure we're working with primary sources of information like the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and not secondary information, or worse," an editor at FactCheck.org told interns (field notes, 6 June 2011).

Inevitably, however, fact checkers must enlist experts from academia or the think-tank world to interpret the data they find. Finding neutral experts can be difficult. "You're going to seek independent, non-biased sources — of which in today's world there are none," a PolitiFact editor joked to trainees (field notes, 15 June 2011). Navigating the think-tank landscape is a matter of tacit journalistic knowledge; certain organizations and experts are deemed reliable despite their ideological orientation. FactCheck.org and PolitiFact items often feature analysis from groups with opposing ideologies, a strategy described at PolitiFact as "triangulating the truth." "Seek multiple sources," trainees were told. "If you can't get an independent source ... go to a conservative and go to a liberal and see where they overlap" (field notes, 15 June 2011). Professional fact checkers trust their own ability to separate factual arguments from partisan "spin."

To understand how to interpret Ghannem's interview on Al-Alam, I interviewed four political scientists suggested to me by a Middle East expert quoted in an earlier PolitiFact story on the Muslim Brotherhood. These scholars agreed on several vital details. First, Muhammad Ghannem was not on the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Council, and therefore not a "top official." Second, while the group's policy toward Israel had been "a bit ambiguous," it had never approached a declaration of war. Finally, Ghannem's comments should be understood in light of longstanding doubts about the legitimacy of the 1979 Egyptian referendum on the peace treaty with Israel (which passed with nearly 100% of the vote). As one explained by e-mail,

The MB is a massive organization with many many different ideological trends within it. I have never heard anyone on or off the record say they "wish to declare war on Israel." I have heard people in the MB rail against Zionism (equating it as imperialism). They almost always talk about the U.S. and Israel and double-standards. I have also read in the papers Mohamad Akif say that the treaty could be put up for a popular referendum. But no one ever said anything about war. (Joshua Stacher, personal communication, 9 February 2011)

Showing your work

PolitiFact's procedures call for the reporter to assign a tentative Truth-O-Meter rating; an ad hoc panel of three editors then reviews the piece and assigns the final rating. In my case, the evidence after 2 days of research seemed decisive. Other than conservative sources citing the same *Jerusalem Post* article, I found no direct support for Beck's claim, which was contradicted by statements from Muslim Brotherhood leaders and by each of the four experts I interviewed. I provisionally rated Beck's claim "False" and three PolitiFact editors agreed unanimously. But the case was not unassailable. As discussed below, critics would object that my analysis ignored evidence that told a different story, putting too much faith in the official pronouncements of hardline Islamists dedicated to Israel's destruction.

Because their conclusions often come into question, professional fact checkers make a point of showing their work. This "transparent" approach to journalism was a constant theme in training sessions. Working transparently requires that all sources used to analyze a claim be revealed to the reader; every Truth-O-Meter item includes a sidebar listing all human and documentary sources, even those not directly quoted. This also means using only on-the-record sources. (PolitiFact's training manual declares that officials who insist on anonymity have been "tolerated for too long" by Washington journalists.) Most rulings rely on 5 to 10 distinct sources, but some cite dozens. The source list attached to each article approximates a kind of scientific reproducibility. One editor explained to me, "When you publish links to the original report, when someone else can follow your reporting and really take it apart, it's more scientific. It's not perfectly scientific, but anyone can verify it" (A. Drobnic Holan, personal communication, 25 February 2011).

Fact checkers perform journalistic transparency in another, less obvious way: Often the text of a fact check simply recounts each of the steps taken to investigate a claim. The newswork supplies the narrative. (This formula was the basis for a writing template included in PolitiFact's training manual.) This is a selective transparency, to be sure, and aspects of the job remain hidden. Still, it offers a broad contrast to conventional political reporting. Fact checkers make explicit factual arguments and therefore justify their choices to the reader, explaining why a particular claim deserves to be checked, how certain sources or experts were chosen, and how the final verdict was reached. My write-up of Glenn Beck's claim hewed closely to that standard formula, walking readers through a somewhat cleaned-up version of the research I had conducted. The published article listed 18 different sources used to document the claim's origins or to support my analysis, including the four expert interviews (see Graves, 2011).

The practice of "showing your work" is basic to fact checking's claim to objectivity. It serves multiple aims, offering the proof meant to justify the verdict but also acting as an answer for critics who are unconvinced. As one fact checker noted in an interview, echoing a common refrain, "We are very transparent in our reporting and our methods, so even if someone disagrees with our rating, we hope they've learned some things from our report" (Pittner, 2014).

Diffusion and contestation

The work of fact checkers often provokes immediate reactions online. My fact check of Glenn Beck, titled “Glenn Beck says Muslim Brotherhood Wants to Declare War on Israel,” was published at 11:12 a.m. on 15 February (Graves, 2011). PolitiFact posted links to the piece on its official Twitter and Facebook accounts. The same day, the liberal fact-checking site Media Matters reproduced most of the original article (“PolitiFact Gives ‘False’ Rating,” 2011), drawing attention from other left-leaning outlets; the fact check eventually was included in a *Daily Show* segment critiquing Fox News. Verdicts challenging high-profile figures on the left travel in the same way across conservative media. Distilling complex fact checks into a single data point—like PolitiFact’s Truth-O-Meter, or *The Washington Post*’s Pinocchio scale—exposes the fact checkers to criticism. But it also makes their work easy to cite and promotes its spread through the media ecosystem.

Glenn Beck also responded within days. On 17 February, a blogger at GlennBeck.com posted a nearly 1,000-word response questioning PolitiFact’s sources and reasoning: “So, the FALSE rating comes from Glenn accurately quoting a newspaper, accurately quoting a Muslim Brotherhood member, who apparently doesn’t rise high enough on the Muslim Brotherhood popularity list for the Woodrow Wilson Center. What a devastating case” (Burguieri, 2011, para. 12). The rebuttal also pointed to a prominent Muslim televangelist, recently profiled by Germany’s *Der Spiegel*, whose violent anti-Israel rants had been featured on Beck’s television program. Several hours later Beck continued this argument on the air:

PolitiFact says that my statement about the Muslim Brotherhood wanting to war with Israel is false despite the fact that we showed you the words of Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Oh, that guy, he’s rated the ninth-most influential Muslim on earth with an audience of 60 million people a week. (Beck, 2011c)

I also received six e-mails disputing my fact check from fans of Glenn Beck. These e-mails questioned PolitiFact’s analysis by citing evidence featured on his program and website. “Night after night Beck shows video of MB members calling for the destruction of Israel,” one complained (personal communication, 24 February 2011). Another asked, “What is the difference between ‘declaring war on Israel’ and praying to Allah ‘to kill all the Zionist Jews’? ... I would like to think that Politifact thinks that Youssef al-Qaradawi is an acceptable spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood” (personal communication, 22 February 2011). “Your parsing is too narrow,” another reader wrote, drawing a comparison to Hitler’s threat in 1939:

The reality is we are staring face to face at a natural and patient enemy with a broad and long history of pursuing world Jihad, with cultural overtake, violent (and largely unpunished) mass murder, terrorism of its own people on purportedly “Muslim” land, and a complete disregard for the tenants of western or even general civilization. When you report such overly parsed responses you miss the broader picture, mislead your readership on the true nature of the issue,

and are whistling past the graveyard, so to speak. (personal communication, 3 March 2011)

Discussion

I suggested at the outset that attention to the actual work of investigating political claims would show that, contrary to the epistemological critique of fact checking, the challenges faced by these journalists are not different in kind from those faced by other fact seekers, even in science. At least three broad points of comparison can be seen with well-established arguments in the sociology of science. The first is the general point that factual inquiry and discourse take place in, and are structured by, social and linguistic contexts — “paradigm groups” (Collins, 1974) or “invisible colleges” (Crane, 1988) or “epistemic cultures” (Knorr-Cetina, 1999) defined by common styles of reasoning and shared assumptions, sometimes tacit, about what count as appropriate questions, methods, and kinds of evidence (see also Kuhn, 2012). A long tradition in journalism studies, some influenced by that work, similarly understands professional journalists as an “interpretive community” (Zelizer, 1993), emphasizing how facts reported in the news depend on interpretive schemes shared by reporters and officials and validated by institutional routines (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). This is not to say that fact-making cultures in science and journalism are identical. Most important, journalism lacks the restrictive features — such as credentialing, esoteric knowledge, technical language, and expensive equipment — that both structure and protect scientific discourse. As the present case amply demonstrates, it is an “uninsulated profession,” one with porous borders and whose practitioners are easily challenged by outsiders (Schudson, 1978, p. 9).

The facts surrounding Glenn Beck’s claim were particularly contentious because they concerned a foreign group without an established presence or allies in the United States. Because of uncertainty about the Muslim Brotherhood, evaluating Beck’s claim raised the question of what kinds of policies the organization could reasonably be expected to pursue if it did gain power in Egypt. The published fact check rested on the group’s official pronouncements — and on the expert consensus that, violent rhetoric aside, Brotherhood leaders would not in fact seek war with Israel. Foreign policy experts reasoned within a policy analysis framework that let them discount evidence that Beck and his supporters considered decisive, such as offhand statements by someone like Muhammad Ghannem. Conversely, U.S. conservatives who saw the group as bent on Israel’s destruction argued that policy statements made for Western audiences should be disregarded in the face of more revealing data like Ghannem’s interview and al-Qaradawi’s speeches.

The second point of comparison highlights the way that logical reasoning is embedded in not just social and discursive but material contexts. The actor-network perspective developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and others emphasizes that the abstract standards we take for granted have to be continually reproduced, what Latour (1987) calls “the concrete work of making abstractions” (p. 241). Their

apparent universality is underwritten by their constant *circulation* in the world—in texts like newspapers and scientific journals, in disciplinary norms and conventions, and also in physical equipment, infrastructure, and so on. This applies to precise, expensively maintained scientific measures as well as looser “quasi-standards” in public life. As Latour (2005) argues: “the circulation of quasi-standards allow[s] anonymous and isolated agencies to slowly become, layer after layer, comparable and commensurable” (p. 230). Bowker and Star (1999) describe this as infrastructural “convergence,” a process by which our tools of investigation help to produce the reality they describe—“the ever local, ever partial work of making it appear that science describes nature (and nature alone) and that politics is about social power (and social power alone)” (p. 46).

This kind of work is endlessly visible in the day-to-day work of fact checkers and other journalists, as well as political actors (see Anderson & Kreiss, 2013). Reporters rely on and reproduce a host of conventional categories and measures (unemployment rates, income brackets, etc.) as well as the institutional arrangements that produce those standards. In the present case, for instance, PolitiFact’s article incrementally validated the international degree-granting infrastructure—itsself a complex hybrid of people, documents, conventions, and so forth—which certified the PhD-bearing experts who decided the question of how to credit Muhammad Ghannem’s words. The case nicely illustrates the mutually strengthening “enrolment” of allies in an actor network (Callon, 1999; Latour, 1987, pp. 108–111). PolitiFact’s article relied on a range of human and textual sources to make its case, and immediately became testimony available for future arguments about the Muslim Brotherhood or Glenn Beck. Each citation in turn would testify to the fact check, and thus to the network of documents, people, and organizations that the fact check tried to draw together into an authoritative argument.

This process mirrors the network of authority-building references that coalesced around the original claim, which the fact check sought to pull apart. *The Jerusalem Post* headline had equated Mohammed Ghannem’s words with Muslim Brotherhood policy; citations by Glenn Beck and others reinforced that link by tying it to other evidence—quoted speech, dramatic videos, news and opinion pieces, and so forth—of the group’s anti-Israel stance. This is *not* to say the two sets of arguments had equal merit, only that, as in scientific debates, assessing their merit demanded interpretation. It was a matter of factual reasoning bounded by specific material, social, and discursive contexts.

Finally, the question of how to weigh Muhammad Ghannem’s words highlights a familiar problem in the sociology of science, sometimes called the “experimenter’s regress,” “a paradox which arises for those who want to use replication as a test of the truth of scientific knowledge claims” (Collins, 1992, p. 2). The problem is simply that—contrary to the popular image of a decisive lab experiment whose outcome speaks for itself—scientists unable to match the results obtained by another lab or predicted by theory cannot be sure whether the error lies in previous work or their own (see also Bloor, 1991; Kuhn, 2012). Similarly, no decisive litmus test could reveal the

Brotherhood's "real" policy toward Israel. Ghannem's rhetoric seemed to clash with official assurances from Muslim Brotherhood leaders. But did that mean his words could be ignored in the face of more authoritative statements? Or, conversely, did it undercut the presumed authority—in a sense, the "officialness"—of those statements? Experts might have agreed that public statements should count less than signs from the "Arab street."

In practice, successful experimental replication often relies on "tacit knowledge" — know-how that isn't formally described but that scientists gain by working together (Collins, 1974, 1992; Polanyi, 1998). Finding a way out of the regress depends on a range of subtle evaluations (of one's own work and of other scientists') that blur the line between technical and social judgments. It depends on trust, produced both interpersonally and through mechanisms like accreditation, licensing, peer review, and so on; as Shapin (1994, p. 19) argues, "distrust is something which takes place on the margins of trusting systems."

This matches scholarly accounts of investigative work by journalists. Ettema and Glasser (1998) argue that in practice investigative reporters rely on a standard of factual coherence, rather than simple correspondence, because they deal with stories in which official facts and the institutional routines that certify them are in doubt (see also Maras, 2013). In such cases—for example, an investigation of doctored crime statistics—corroboration depends on "tacit knowledge of the journalistic craft" (p. 142). Unlike their peers working on conventional stories, investigative reporters cannot apply any mechanical test to verify facts; instead they look for coherence, or "goodness of fit," among multiple pieces of evidence, which individually may not be decisive, or even completely verifiable. Similarly, where a conventional news report will simply relay an official announcement about, say, job growth, a journalist faced with adjudicating a claim about jobs may be forced to consider how such measures are produced, what their limits are, what other measures are available, and so on. Fact checkers look for factual coherence—what they call "triangulating the truth"—when experts disagree, evidence is incomplete, and/or standards are in question.

In this case, PolitiFact's verdict rested formally on the argument that Muhammad Ghannem could not speak for the Muslim Brotherhood. As one expert was quoted saying, "It's a big organization, and there may be people who say things like that, but that doesn't mean it's policy" (Graves, 2011, para. 8). But that became decisive only in light of a range of other factors, including the actual context of Ghannem's statement on Al-Alam, the strategic illogic of an Egyptian move against Israel, and, not least, the apparent carelessness with which Beck and others had labeled Ghannem a "top official" representing Brotherhood policy. For fact checkers, evidence of deceit or sloppiness contributes to evaluations of truth value. This is not necessarily different from scientific practice; scientists consider circumstantial factors like reputation in deciding whether to trust an experimental result, and a paper that contradicts previous work gains force by casting doubt on the methods used by other scholars. In practice, judgments of value always inform the work of verifying facts—what Ettema and Glasser call "the intimate interdependence of fact and value" (p. 131).

The case reviewed here has relevance beyond the study of political fact checking. Fact checkers' explicit mission of adjudicating public controversies highlights relatively unexplored points of intersection between journalism studies and STS; in this way it adds texture to established accounts of the ideology of professional journalism, underscoring the simultaneously material and semantic commitments that ground objective practice. To highlight two obvious examples, the account presented here dovetails with Tuchman's (1978) notion of self-validating "webs of facticity" and with Hallin's (1989) ideological spheres of consensus, deviancy, and legitimate controversy. Attention to the (sometimes competing or uncertain) standards that constitute institutional reality helps to explain not only how particular factual constructions come to seem self-evident, but also how the factual terrain journalists and other professional communicators navigate becomes less certain in divided political moments.

Notes

- 1 A version of the case study examined here is also described by Graves (2016).
- 2 Primary fieldwork for this study took place in February, June, and December of 2011, although it is also informed by participation in fact-checking conferences and meetings in 2012, 2013, and 2014.
- 3 The original page can be seen in Arabic on Al-Alam's website at <http://www.alalam.ir/news/56855>. A translation by the Middle East Media Research Institute, a conservative media monitoring group, is available at <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/2787.htm>.

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